



July 31, 2010 – Santa Clara, CA

Urban Legend: Cancer, Part 1

It's been a long time since I addressed an Urban Legend, so I thought I'd take on a big one: an email called *Johns Hopkins Update: Very Good Article*. I'm going to reprint the entire email (it's in italics) as I received it and then comment on each section; because it's so long, I'm going to break it into two parts. The second part will appear next Saturday. I specifically asked Paula not to edit the email so you can get the real flavor for the way it was written.

Before I begin, just remember that what makes urban legends seem real is that they use real people and places and contain some truth. They sound so good because they prey on our innate skepticism of authority—and the medical community is authoritative to say the least. But what really matters is the science behind what's being said, and that's where urban legends fall apart. Let's get to the first part.

Part 1

Johns Hopkins Update—Very Good Article

After years of telling people chemotherapy is the only way to try ('try', being the key word) to eliminate cancer, Johns Hopkins is finally starting to tell you there is an alternative way.

The first thing you should know is that Johns Hopkins refutes this email on their website. They've gotten so many requests for verification that they finally had to address the issue.

Cancer Update from Johns Hopkins:

1. Every person has cancer cells in the body. These cancer cells do not show up in the standard tests until they have multiplied to a few billion. When doctors tell cancer patients that there are no more cancer cells in their bodies after treatment, it just means the tests are unable to detect the cancer cells because they have not reached the detectable size.

The first part is true. It seems freaky, but cells gone wild is not that unusual in a body with trillions of cells. Repairing them is part of the immune system's normal process but sometimes, it just doesn't happen the way it should and cancers grow.

2. Cancer cells occur between 6 to more than 10 times in a person's lifetime.

Makes no sense. How does anyone know how many times cancer cells are produced when we can't see what's going on—as stated in point number 1? There would be no way to do this research.

3. When the person's immune system is strong the cancer cells will be destroyed and prevented from multiplying and forming tumors.

Oversimplification. Yes, when everything goes right, the immune system eliminates out-of-control cells. But cancer is a crafty disease. Based on what Johns Hopkins actually says, it's the cancer's ability to mask itself from the immune system that causes it to grow undetected. Most of the time, this has to do with the proteins the cancer

cells produce; for all you sci-fi fans, think of these proteins as cloaking devices. While the immune system normally repairs or destroys cancer cells, it can't fight what it doesn't see.

4. When a person has cancer it indicates the person has nutritional deficiencies. These could be due to genetic, but also to environmental, food and lifestyle factors.

This implies that all people would have to do is eat perfectly from birth on—which no one could do—and they would never get cancer. Taken to the extreme, that means they could walk into a nuclear reactor, inhale radon gas, smoke cigarettes, and be exposed to many other carcinogens, and they would never get cancer. Does that even sound reasonable? Cancer has many causes, not just diet.

5. To overcome the multiple nutritional deficiencies, changing diet to eat more adequately and healthy, 4-5 times/day and by including supplements will strengthen the immune system.

Again, this is an oversimplification. We don't know what deficiencies everyone has. How can we address them specifically? We can generally, but how do we really know what will strengthen everyone's immune system? The operative word is everyone. That's why some studies that we expect to show great results for reducing cancer, such as supplementing with vitamin E or beta-carotene, don't help everyone and in some cases, seem to be harmful. Everyone's diet is different; everyone's genetics are different. Thus everyone's nutritional deficiencies will be different.

6. Chemotherapy involves poisoning the rapidly-growing cancer cells and also destroys rapidly-growing healthy cells in the bone marrow, gastrointestinal tract etc, and can cause organ damage, like liver, kidneys, heart, lungs etc.

True. That's why people lose their hair and their immune system is compromised during chemo. The part about organ damage may or may not be true. Chemotherapy is becoming more precise as cancer specialists target specific proteins, and radiation is very precise. While other organs may be affected, it's not true that they absolutely will be.

7.. Radiation while destroying cancer cells also burns, scars and damages healthy cells, tissues and organs.

True for the most part but again, treatments are becoming very precise and the damage area is limited.

8. Initial treatment with chemotherapy and radiation will often reduce tumor size. However prolonged use of chemotherapy and radiation do not result in more tumor destruction.

First part true; second part not necessarily true. While radiation doesn't seem to work on the exact same area twice, it doesn't mean it won't work at all. Chemotherapies are improved over time. Using newer and different ones means that statement isn't exactly true—a new form of chemo may succeed where an earlier version failed or was less successful. Giving up too soon would be a big mistake.

9. When the body has too much toxic burden from chemotherapy and radiation the immune system is either compromised or destroyed, hence the person can succumb to various kinds of infections and complications.

This can be true, but it's only temporary. "Destroyed" implies it's gone forever. Ever have the flu? Your immune system is compromised while it's fighting the flu. How about a stressful day? Your immune system is compromised then as well, but you don't really know the extent. During cancer treatment, at least you have physicians monitoring your immune system and overall health and ready to step in when necessary.

10. Chemotherapy and radiation can cause cancer cells to mutate and become resistant and difficult to destroy. Surgery can also cause cancer cells to spread to other sites.

Chemo and radiation kill cancer cells—that's what they do. Concerning cancer surgery, this is a myth from my youth. I can remember hearing, "Once they opened him up, they saw the cancer. They closed him up and the cancer spread, and he was gone in a few weeks." That's simply not true. When I was a kid, diagnostic tools were not as precise as they are today, and cancers weren't caught as early as they are now. By the time they operated, the cancer had already spread and it was unlikely the patient would survive anyway. The surgery did not accelerate the process.

The Bottom Line

If you can believe it, this is only half the email. I'll address the other half next Saturday. Until then, if you have any other Urban Legends you'd like me to examine, send them to me in an email.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

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